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A Field Report from Okinawa, Japan: Applied Ecomusicology and the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project

JAMES EDWARDS

Ecomusicology was far from my mind when I met Miyazawa Kazufumi at the 2016 International Small Island Cultures Conference in Naha, Okinawa. Miyazawa, born in Yamanashi Prefecture, is famous throughout Japan for the folk-rock ballad "Shima uta," which he wrote in 1990 and recorded with his band The Boom in 1992. A commercial and critical success, "Shima uta" punctuates arena rock textures with a folkish melody in the Ryūkyū (Okinawa) scale played on the *sanshin*, a Ryūkyūan plucked lute. Miyazawa obliged the conference with a beautiful rendition of "Shima uta," self-accompanied on sanshin. However, he had not come to recount his past musical triumphs. His aim was outreach for the 100-Year *Kuruchi* Forest Project, a community-based music and natural resource management organization based on Okinawa Island. Over the course of Miyazawa's lecture-performance, the concept of ecomusicology, to which I have given much abstract thought, became both vividly concrete and viscerally moving. This brief state-of-the-field report outlines the history of the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project and concludes with some reflections on the relationship between ecomusicological theory and practice, which I hope to validate through fieldwork with the project.

The 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project is a multi-stakeholder endeavour in Yomitan Village in central Okinawa designed to gradually increase the local population of kuruchi or Ryūkyūan ebony (*Diospyros ferrea*; also known as *Ryūkyū kokutan*). Ryūkyūan ebony is the preferred material for the neck of the sanshin, a three-stringed lute distinguished by its resonating membrane of snakeskin. An icon of local culture, the sanshin is descended from the Chinese *sanxian*, and was likely carried via multiple economic and diplomatic channels from Imperial China to the Ryūkyū Kingdom (a Chinese tribute state) during the 14th and 15th centuries.

Ryūkyūan elites proactively incorporated the sanshin into their creative lives; in 1612, when the royal government appointed a magistrate's office to oversee the sourcing and production of high-value goods (the *kaizuribugyōsho*), sanshin-makers were put on the payroll (Yano 2003: 394). Over time, it disseminated to other social strata, as well as to other islands in the Ryūkyū archipelago. Thanks to the cultural preservation efforts of tradition-bearers, the sanshin and its repertoire survived the two great shocks of Ryūkyūan modernity: Japan's 1879 annexation of the Ryūkyū Kingdom and formation of Okinawa Prefecture, and the 1945 Battle of Okinawa and subsequent 27 years of American domination.[1] It was a traditional musicians' association, the Nomura School Classical Music Preservation Society (*Nomura-ryū Koten Ongaku Hozonkai*), that first proposed cultivating Ryūkyūan ebony in Yomitan Village. In 2008, the Society collaborated with village officials to begin planting ebony trees in the northwest corner of the Zakimi Castle Ruins World Heritage Site Park. However, young ebony trees are delicate, and maintenance proved a challenge. The grove began to go to the weeds.

As Hirata Daiichi of the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project executive committee tells it, this is is the point at which Miyazawa entered the story (2015a). In March 2012, Miyazawa telephoned Hirata out of the blue to ask for a meeting, then appeared in short order at Hirata's office on the eighth floor of the Prefectural Government Building in Naha, Okinawa (he was Department Manager for Culture, Tourism, and Sports at the time). Usually reserved, Miyazawa was in a talkative mood, and the conversation flowed from his thoughts on the 20th anniversary of "Shima uta," to the sanshin, to the state of the Okinawan folk music scene —— until he suddenly paused, thought a moment, and said "I've been thinking of planting kuruchi" (Hirata 2015a). Hirata was struck by Miyazawa's earnestness, and worked to connect him with the neglected kuruchi grove in Yomitan Village. By spring 2012, a new executive committee had taken shape comprising Yomitan mayor Ishimine Denjitsu as Chairman, Miyazawa as Honorary Chairman, and Hirata as "principal advocate" (*hittō sandōjin*). A press conference was held on July 16, and an inaugural tree-planting ceremony and concert were held on October 20.

In the several years since, the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project has flourished. Its promotional materials proclaim:

> People who want to watch the ebony trees grow taller each year while drinking together, people who love the sound of the sanshin, people who pray that Okinawa will enjoy peace for a hundred years and beyond, and people who share such feelings: all these people are members. (Hirata 2015a)

This inclusive attitude, combined with Hirata and Miyazawa's tireless outreach, have gained the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project a following both inside Okinawa and across Japan. Every month, volunteers gather for rigorous maintenance sessions conducted in consultation with ebony expert Taniguchi Shingo (of the University of the Ryūkyūs Forestry Department). Once a year, on the sixth day of the ninth lunar month, a tree-planting ceremony and musical celebration are held. In 2013, the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project received prizes from Daikin Industries and the Bank of the Ryūkyūs, and it won the Japanese National Land Afforestation Promotion Organization's Presidential Prize in 2016. The project has also forged a relationship with students in the Environmental Engineering Program at Nanbu Agricultural and Forestry High School. In 2016 and 2017, participants gave presentations at the University of the Ryūkyūs and several other schools and universities, as well as at academic conferences such as the International Small Island Cultures Conference (Hirata, Facebook correspondence, Sept 21, 2017).

For Hirata, it is precisely these successes that have driven home "the gravity of the words *100 years*" (2015a). As some of his more sceptical associates have reminded him, it is unlikely that any of the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project's current contributors will live to see it through. This is because only the dense core of a mature ebony tree is sufficiently hard to yield a sanshin neck with ideal acoustic qualities. Ebony is slow-growing and, after being cut, the wood must be dried naturally in a storehouse for 15 to 30 years before finally being carved. All in all, the journey from seedling to sanshin can take 150 years. Of course, it is possible that some young participants will follow this journey to its completion. By way of proof, Hirata invited an 89-year-old local woman to the stage during the 2015 celebration (Hirata 2015b). His aim in doing so was twofold: first, to forge ties between the generations and cultivate a sense of care for the future; second, to bind this sense of care to the recognition of past challenges. Yomitan locals in their eighties and nineties survived the horror of the United States' 1945 invasion of Okinawa, which began near the village. Hirata points this out in a Facebook post about *Irei-no-hi*, the day of remembrance of the Battle of Okinawa (Kuruchi no mori 2017). One cannot readily imagine the ecological and human devastation that Yomitan residents would have seen during the battle. Performing arts scholar Yano Teruo stresses that "it would not be an exaggeration to say that neither a single tree nor blade of grass was left standing" after the battle (1974: 366). Yano goes on to describe how, in the months that followed the Battle of Okinawa's conclusion, "the sound-color of the sanshin, mingled with the roar of the sea at night, flowed through refugee camps, turning peoples' thoughts toward the good old days and toward hope for the future, gradually opening their spirits" (370). It is striking to think that

this lifesaving sound-colour resonated through 150-year-old hearts of kuruchi, grown twice as dense as cedar "precisely because they had survived in a stormy and difficult-to-endure environment" (Hirata 2015b). Here we feel the force of Hirata's "gravity of the words *100 years*": a resonant legacy of hardship and perseverance, flowing through trees and humans, and spanning the ages as song.

This is the gravity that impelled Miyazawa Kazufumi to write "Shima uta," the lyrics of which describe the final parting of two friends implied to be fleeing the devastation of the Battle of Okinawa. For a mainstream hit, "Shima uta" is jarringly intimate and raw, and Miyazawa has spoken candidly about whether he, as mainland Japanese, should be the one giving global voice to the hard-earned Okinawan narrative and musical tradition (Gillan 2009: 190). His concerns are couched in awareness of a history of structural violence: since Japan annexed the Ryūkyū Islands, it has consistently pursued exploitative policies of combined and uneven development that have rendered the islands economically precarious, while simultaneously subjecting or abandoning them to a series of undemocratic systems of governance (cf. Matsumura 2015; Okinawa Rekishi Kenkyūkai 1977). Okinawa is still the poorest Japanese prefecture, and Okinawans, as a rule, still have less of a voice in mainland discourse than vice versa. This asymmetry conditioned Miyazawa's rise as a de facto ambassador of Okinawan sounds in mainland Japan. Miyazawa is well aware of this fact and seeks to make the best of it by using his platform to empower local colleagues through projects such as an ongoing effort to record aging folk singers (Miyazawa 2016a; cf. Utakata Project 2017).

For Miyazawa, the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project is first and foremost another such expression of gratitude to Okinawa. However, it is also a method of negotiating unanticipated cultural and economic transformations in which he played a role. As he explains it:

> Several years ago, I was drinking with some sanshin makers, who told me: "Thanks to you, the sanshin has spread across Japan, and that's good. But you know, you're also the reason that sanshin materials have disappeared from Okinawa and have to be imported from abroad now!" Of course, it was said as a barroom joke, but I found that I couldn't laugh. It's important to broaden [traditions], but if you go too far, you end up spreading yourself thin. I realized how frightening that was and decided to do something to protect the core. (2016b)

The context here is the so-called "Okinawa boom" phenomenon. The first Okinawa boom refers to an upswing in travel to Okinawa, made possible

by its 1972 reversion from American to Japanese rule. The second boom refers to a surge of enthusiasm during the 1990s in media representations of Okinawa, as exemplified by the nationwide success of Okinawan folk-rock bands like Champloose, Nēnēs, and Rinken Band, as well as of Okinawan-inspired songs by Miyazawa and others (Roberson 2001: 212).[2] Whereas the 1970s boom was primarily touristic, the 1990s boom inspired active appropriation of Okinawan culture. Perhaps disillusioned by the collapse of the 1980s bubble economy, certain young people saw in Okinawan culture an alternative model of Japanese-ness grounded in pre-capitalist solidarities and traditions. Interest in the sanshin exploded: third-generation Okinawan-American Wesley Uenten, who was studying in Kawasaki at the time, recalls that "from around 1991, the number of Yamatunchu ([mainland] Japanese) students seeking sanshin lessons would sometimes overflow the [Okinawan] sensei's house" (2015; cf. Cho 2014).

While it would be hard to verify the half-joking assertion that it was Miyazawa who inspired such "Okinawaphiles" (*Okinawazuki*), it is certainly true that demand for sanshin has increased over the past few decades, and that as a result the centres of manufacturing and material sourcing have moved from Okinawa to China and Southeast Asia, where labour is cheap and ebony is more abundant. Whereas a Chinese sanshin can be purchased for a few hundred dollars, one crafted in Okinawa using indigenous ebony will run into the thousands (Gillan 2012: 35). It is hard to see how this state of affairs could be sustainable for local makers or ebony producers, whose global competition has forced them to the high end of a larger but still limited market.

This dilemma recalls discourses on resilience and adaptive management, which originated in systems ecology but have since migrated into music scholarship. Prior to the 1970s, the dominant paradigm in ecological science was the "balance of nature," which holds that variables within ecosystems, like plant and animal populations, tend toward stable equilibria. Under this paradigm, the aim of sustainable management is to minimize or compensate for disturbances and maintain a stable state. Longitudinal studies, however, show that many ecosystems in fact move between multiple semi-stable states or "regimes." Such "regime shifts," which rebalance populations without necessarily eliminating them, can be cyclical (e.g. in response to climactic oscillations) or non-cyclical (e.g. in response to disasters or human interventions). The aim of sustainable management under this paradigm is to enhance resilience: "the ability of these systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist" (Holling 1973: 17).

Jeff Todd Titon proposes resilience and adaptive management as paradigms for applied ethnomusicology that are better suited to contemporary

cultural dynamics than the old paradigm of conservation (2015: 158). Rather than attempting to return a given music culture to an older, ostensibly natural equilibrium — for instance, by creating incentives for traditionalist performers while withholding them from syncretic performers — adaptive cultural management fosters mechanisms of resilience such as flexible, bottom-up social networks bound by diverse spectra of interests. The 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project spontaneously manifests this principle. Annexation by Japan, domination by the United States, reversion to Japan, and the "Okinawa boom" of the 1990s were "regime shifts" (in both the political-economic and ecological senses) that disrupted the balance of variables such as demand for sanshin and sustainable ebony yield. The 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project, however, does not aim to roll back these shifts (e.g. by discouraging sanshin-playing by mainland Japanese or delegitimizing the musical fusions that help drive popular interest). Quite the opposite: the Project does outreach nationwide, has hosted not only mainland Japanese but also Hawaiian musicians at its festivals, and welcomes everyone to its maintenance sessions. By proclaiming that "people who love the sound of the sanshin … all these people are members," the Project nurtures precisely the type of multilateral social networks that make music cultures resilient.

In a recent correspondence, Hirata expressed interest in the concept of ecomusicology, which has not yet bridged into Japanese music scholarship (Facebook correspondence, Sept 21, 2017). It is certainly conceivable that the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project could find inspiration and practical guidance in the paradigms of resilience and adaptive management proposed by Titon. By way of a conclusion, I would like to speculate as to other ways in which ecomusicological principles and resources might be applied to support sustainable music practitioners. One potential contribution would be to amplify the resonance between likeminded endeavours, whether by liaising them directly or merely by providing a shared conceptual vocabulary. Aaron Allen and Kevin Dawe, for example, offer sophisticated accounts of the political ecology of musical instrument manufacturing that fit the Okinawan case as well as the communities they study (violin-makers and sustainable guitar-makers, respectively). As Allen argues, the "sharing of local knowledge and histories" between such communities could help them learn from each other's successes and mistakes (Allen 2012: 314; cf. Dawe 2015). Connecting the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project with geographically distant but ideologically consonant organizations like the International Pernambuco Conservation Initiative and the African Blackwood Conservation Project might enable such an exchange of best practices — or even catalyze partnerships capable of achieving heightened brand equity and economic leverage.

Another potential contribution would be to open new perspectives on the complex cultural politics behind the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project. Here, critical ecomusicology and political ecology can provide insight. Okinawa presents a case in which a musical ecosystem has globalized at a rate that outstrips the capacity of the local biological ecosystem to supply its most iconic artifact. As uneven Japanese development policies have long worked to keep Okinawa poor, an ironic side effect is that Okinawans may be on average less likely than mainland Japanese enthusiasts to be able to afford indigenous ebony sanshin. Which is to say, an asymmetrical "human metabolism with nature" has colluded to deprecate Okinawan ecosystems while simultaneously inhibiting Okinawans' access to the material and sonic signifiers of their very indigeneity (cf. Foster 2000: 141). Adopting a critical theory framework makes the concurrence of such musical, economic, and environmental dispossessions clear. This is crucial, as Japan continues to pursue antidemocratic policies that threaten Okinawan ecosystems, communities, and soundscapes alike. For example, witness the current Japanese-sanctioned United States effort to develop Cape Henoko into a military air station, thereby destroying an invaluable marine ecosystem while also subjecting indigenous communities and entombed ancestors to continual "low frequency noise and the thunder of military aircraft" (Yoshikawa 2016; Urashima 2016). Ecomusicology, understood as ecocritical thinking about music and sound, offers a theoretical and methodological toolkit with which to trace such intersections and advocate new solidarities.

Setting aside questions of strategy, placing the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project into discourse with academic ecomusicology is also worthwhile for the intellectual pleasure and inspiration it gives. At first glance, the critical strain in ecomusicology can appear unrelentingly pessimistic: it is premised, after all, on the recognition of systemic crisis (Edwards 2015a: 153). However, it also presumes care for the future: why theorize —— or musick, for that matter —— into a void? Hirata's powerful phrasing, "the gravity of *100 years*," illuminates two crucial parallels between music and sustainable development. First, both are methods of negotiating with time and the existence of the Other, who is subject to the same conditions of finitude as the self; and second, both are grounded in hope. Neither Miyazawa nor Hirata labour under the illusion that the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project will singlehandedly undo the asymmetries of modernization and return Okinawa to a mythic state of prelapsarian equilibrium. However, they do hope eventually to expand their planting efforts from Yomitan across the prefecture, and dream of "a future in which sanshin made with Okinawan ebony are the standard" (Miyazawa 2016a). The words "100 years" certainly echo with gravity, but also with the earthy romance of such hopes and dreams (Hirata 2015a).

Notes

1. In the immediate aftermath of the Japanese annexation of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, both mainland Japanese authorities and a faction of Japanese-educated Ryūkyūan elites aggressively attempted to suppress many aspects of indigenous culture, including some musical customs and traditions. However, a fraction of the old class of courtly performers remained committed to the private propagation of classical music and dance, while another fraction sought to carve out a new social niche by adapting them to the commercial stage. Likewise, in many villages, non-courtly traditions remained deeply embedded in everyday life (cf. Edwards 2015b).

2. This is not to say Okinawan-inflected rock and pop were entirely new in mainland Japan: Kina Shōkichi of Champloose and China Sadao, manager of the Nenes, had both been on the scene since the late 1970s, while Hosono Haruomi had covered the iconic Yaeyaman song "Asadoya Yunta" on his 1978 album *Paraiso*.

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